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Confronting Kremlin and Communist Corruption

Written Testimony by Congresswoman Maria Elvira Salazar (FL-27)

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Thank you Senator Cardin, Congressman Cohen, and Helsinki Commissioners for inviting me to testify at this important hearing. Corruption is a cancer on the world and a grave threat to freedom and human rights.

Today's dictators rule through corruption. These corrupt leaders are kleptocrats – a fancy word for rulers that steal from their people to enrich themselves. They plunder their countries to consolidate power, while they exploit and abandon their people. They have destroyed the rule of law in their own countries, and they use this blood money to spread lies around the world. We see the same pattern repeated over and over: we see it in the Kremlin and the Chinese Communist Party, we see it in dictators like Daniel Ortega and Nicolas Maduro, and we see it in the Castro Regime. This cancer is eating away at the free world, and this evil must be eradicated.

For me, this is personal. I have seen firsthand the devastation brought by kleptocrats. I am the daughter of exiles and political refugees – my parents fled the Castro Regime with only the clothes on their back and five dollars in their pocket. Castro turned a promising country into a living hell for my people.

Before coming to Congress, I was a reporter and lived all over Latin America. I reported from Venezuela and saw firsthand how Chavez and Maduro made the richest country in South America a failed state. They promised an end to corruption – but delivered the most corrupt government the continent has ever seen. They brought misery, death, and starvation to their people.

Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua's Dictator, jailed my ex-husband for daring to challenge him in a presidential election. Arturo Cruz is currently in a torture camp. There is nothing these evil leaders fear more than a free and fair election.

In Mexico, I saw pervasive corruption overrule law and order and empower cartels. These cartels exploit the weakest among them. They enable child sex traffickers – and they export their corruption to the United States.

These are not far-away problems. The dirty money flooding our country from corruption destroys the lives of average Americans. For decades, Miami was a hotbed of laundered cartel funds and the stolen riches of corrupt regimes. The violence this brought often spilled into the streets – and Americans died. But there are lesser-known stories. More recently, Ukrainian oligarch Igor Kolomoisky's dirty money in Ohio steel mills and skyscrapers led to worker injuries, bankrupt factories, unpaid taxes, and hundreds of lost jobs. And this is only what we can see – there is every reason to believe that dictator money is

harming Americans and undermining U.S. institutions all over the country. That is why I am committed to fighting corruption – a fight that could not be more quintessentially American.

We have already made enormous progress this Congress. The House of Representatives formed the bipartisan Congressional Caucus against Foreign Corruption and Kleptocracy, and I am proud to be a founding Member. This is not just a symbolic effort - the Counter-Kleptocracy Caucus is pushing an aggressive legislative agenda to curb corruption. We are creating new authorities to target the thieves and crooks who bring suffering on their populations and imprison anyone who dares speak out. We are striking at all three pillars of counter-kleptocracy: One, we are purging dictator cash from the United States. Two, we are creating tools to dismantle these corrupt networks. Three, we are helping freedom fighters to build free societies abroad.

It is a pleasure to testify alongside my friend, Congressman Tom Malinowski, with whom I have led numerous bills to fight dictatorships. Chairman Cardin, our legislative collaboration began with the House introduction of your bill, the Combating Global Corruption Act. We are great believers in this bill, which would create public, tiered reporting of all countries in the world based on their compliance with anti-corruption norms and standards. This kind of evaluation and transparency is necessary to raise corruption to the level of priority it deserves, and to put tyrants on notice.

In the wake of the Pandora Papers investigations, Congressman Malinowski and I also introduced the ENABLERS Act. This bill would require that the professional enablers who help dictators and their cronies bring dirty money into our country ask about the source of suspicious money. This commonsense measure is long overdue. It is unacceptable that only banks – and no one else – is required to ask about the source of suspicious money. America must stop doing business with dictators. Business with the United States of America is a privilege, not a right. One which should be denied to dictators.

Corrupt dictators must be forced to sleep in the bed they've made. They cannot be allowed to live and hide their money abroad, enjoying the very rights they deny their own people. Their family members should not be allowed to travel here, eat at our restaurants, or shop in our malls. And working together, Congress and the Administration can block these murderous thugs from our country.

Thanks to your efforts, Mr. Chairman, and those of the Helsinki Commission, we have recognized the existential nature of this threat and are responding. This bipartisan and bicameral Commission is a model for all of Congress. The Commission's determined focus to confront America's most pressing threats and your dedicated staff are a credit to this institution. I look forward to continuing work with the Helsinki Commissioners and my fellow Caucus members to curb corruption and end brutal dictatorships. I want to again thank the Helsinki Commission for the opportunity to testify today.